

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 166 955

PL 010 848

AUTHOR Tinkler, Trevor
 TITLE Learning to Teach Listening Comprehension.
 PUB DATE 78
 NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the International Conference of International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (10th, London, England, 1978); Not available in hard copy because of marginal legibility of the original document

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
 DESCRIPTORS Applied Linguistics; Comprehension Development; English (Second Language); Higher Education; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; Language Teachers; *Learning Activities; Learning Difficulties; *Learning Processes; *Listening Comprehension; Listening Skills; *Methods Courses; Secondary Education; Second Language Learning; *Teacher Education; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This article describes a course in listening comprehension methodology in a College of Education in Holland. The main concern of the article is to examine the teacher-trainer's organization of the students' learning process. The course is divided into three sections: (1) group discussion of the concept of listening comprehension; (2) discussion of listening comprehension difficulties encountered by Dutch students; and (3) presentation and discussion of listening comprehension demonstration lessons by students. The question of how students best learn to teach listening comprehension is answered in terms of course structure, the teacher's actions in the class, and the teacher's attitudes and sensitivity to the students. It is claimed that some of the positive features of the learning process organization should be applicable to similar educational situations outside Holland. A brief description is included of some of the materials and methods developed by the students for listening comprehension instruction on the secondary level. (Author/AMH)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. What the article is about

This article focuses on a course in listening comprehension methodology in a College of education in Holland. It is a course which is well-tryed, since I have been giving it for 4 years now and it would seem to be of some relevance for people constructing similar courses in many other countries. I shall briefly describe some of the materials and methods developed and employed by the students for developing secondary schoolpupils' listening comprehension ability. But I shall be more concerned with the teacher-trainer's organization of the students' learning process in the College of Education. Hence the title of the article.

1.2. The students

The students taking the course are about 21 years old, with a good command of English but with very little teaching experience and only a limited knowledge of and skill in EFL methodology. They are being trained to teach English in secondary technical schools of various kinds.

1.5. Time available

There is a total of 60 hours (10 1½-hour class sessions and 45 out-of-class hours) spread over 6 weeks. Quite a lot of work can be done in the time available, especially because the number of students taking the course at any one time rarely exceeds 12.

2. WORK DONE AND COMMENTS ON IT

2.1. Organization of course-work plus comments

The work is divided into three major sections:

- 1) sub-group and total group discussion of what is meant by 'listening comprehension';
- 2) total_group discussion of some general listening comprehension difficulties and some specific difficulties encountered by pupils in Dutch secondary technical schools;
- 3) total-group discussion of listening comprehension sessions prepared and demonstrated by individual students. By a listening comprehension session I mean any period of time—from a few minutes to a whole lesson—dedicated to listening comprehension work.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Trevor Tinkler

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND
USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

2.2. What is 'listening comprehension'?

The question of what is involved in 'listening comprehension' is something which can only be examined superficially in the time available. But the shortage of time happens to fit in with my belief that in the initial phases of learning to teach a largely pragmatic approach to learning process organization is required. By this I mean first that the quantity of 'theory' to be learned by the students is kept to what the teacher judges to be the minimum necessary for reasonably effective teaching, secondly that what theory is introduced is fully digested, and thirdly that students' implementation of the acquired theory in practice is thoroughly exercised. What is considered important, therefore, is that the students have some working hypothesis of 'listening comprehension' on the basis of which they can prepare and implement listening comprehension sessions. This working hypothesis is derived from four sources:

- 1) Corder, S.P., Introducing Applied Linguistics, pp. 115-127, where a language performance model is discussed;
- 2) Rivers, W.M., Teaching Foreign Language Skills, pp.135-157, where there is a discussion of stages in the comprehension of speech;
- 3) students' own ideas;
- 4) ideas fed into the total group discussion by the teacher.

Obviously the working hypothesis developed varies to some extent from individual to individual and group to group. What is standard is a basic awareness that there are many sub-skills making up the general listening comprehension skill—including the ability to discriminate phonemes, recognize words, identify stress, intonation and syntactic patterns, retain selected and summarized portions of what is heard, anticipate the development and conclusion of the speakers' utterance, mentally check and challenge the ongoing utterance being listened to, and work out the communicative intentions of the speaker.

2.3. Listening comprehension difficulties

To provide a good foundation for the discussion of the second major section of the course—learners' listening comprehension difficulties—the students are provided with 'English as she is heard: aural difficulties experienced by foreign learners'. This is an unpublished article prepared by Kenneth James, Lecturer in Education and Tutor in English for Overseas Students in the University of Manchester. Examined in the article are some of the listening comprehension difficulties experienced by overseas students coming to study various subjects at Manchester University. The difficulties are organized into such categories as:

- 1) Phoneme discrimination
- 2) Rhythm
- 3) Division of the stream of speech into words
- 4) Lack of exposure to and thus familiarity with natural English spoken at normal speed
- 5) Psychological problems
- 6) Vocabulary
- 7) Lack of prediction
- 8) Lack of familiarity with various registers, styles, accents

These categories are often further sub-divided. Thus Division of the stream of speech into words causes problems because of difficulties with:

- 1) junctural cues, e.g. a name/an aim
- 2) phonotactic uncertainty, e.g. this strain/this train
- 3) phonemes
- 4) variability of English word stress
- 5) ambiguity of many function words
e.g. /ə/ can be the words a, Her, or are or the morpheme er as in in a louder manner, allowed a winner, this set are dancing and this set her dancing.
- 6) rapid articulation of unstressed syllables
e.g. possibility
- 7) contracted forms, e.g. can't, I'm, you're

James' article gives examples and categories of listening comprehension difficulties experienced by speakers of a variety of mother languages. It thus helps my students to extend and clarify the concept they have so far build up of what listening comprehension is, what components it is made up of. The article also serves as a springboard for discussion of specific and common listening comprehension difficulties experienced by pupils in secondary technical schools in Holland, and this is a key discussion in the course because it serves the purpose of indicating teaching tasks (connected with listening comprehension development) which will probably need special attention.

2.4. Discussion of prepared listening comprehension sessions

2.4.1. General organization

The third section of the course, taking up almost 75% of the total time available, is the examination of listening comprehension sessions prepared in advance by individual students. Sometimes a roster is fixed at the beginning of this section of work so that students know in advance when they must present work to the total group. The main

problem here is that class sessions can be greatly affected by students due to present work being absent. Another form of organization tried is to set all the students at the beginning an assignment of 4 or 5 sessions to prepare on different relevant listening comprehension difficulties. All students are required to have at least one listening comprehension session prepared for each class session. Then in each class session a random selection of students are called upon to demonstrate their sessions. This system has the advantage of 1) overcoming absenteeism, 2) requiring all students to work more actively more regularly and 3) imparting a stronger feeling of group identity and common purpose,

2.4.2. Specific student tasks

The task of each student in this section of the course can be broken into a number of stages.

1) Choose a listening comprehension difficulty which you know Dutch secondary technical-school pupils have.

2) Prepare a session plan in which you tackle the difficulty, and in which you specify the kind of school and the class (=level) of the target pupils, the aims of the session, the procedure to be followed and the materials to be used.

3) Either a) demonstrate the session to the other students in the group, which involves either preparing or collecting together the materials and aids planned (books, exercises, handouts, tape-recorder, etc.), and shortening the session only by reducing the number of items in exercises;

or b) describe the session to the other students in the group. □

Demonstration is much more effective than description for various reasons. First, the rest of the group can more easily develop a clear understanding of the session and are in a better position to offer useful comments. Secondly, even when the rest of the group has a clear understanding of a session, it is still difficult for them to assess certain points if there is no demonstration. I am talking about assessment of the session's likely effectiveness (in terms of aims), level of difficulty, degree of interest, practicability, general appropriateness, etc. Indeed, the student who has prepared the session often discovers weaknesses in his session as a result of demonstrating it. A third important reason is that demonstrating work creates more interest and liveliness in the class than describing work.

It is important to note here, in connection with demonstration, that no attempt is made to play 'let's pretend' games, with the demonstrator pretending to be a teacher and the rest of the group 14-year-old pupils. On the contrary, students have responded much better to a practical acceptance of the situation as it is—a student-teacher demonstrating to other student-teachers a suggested way of tackling a particular listening comprehension difficulty.

After an individual student has demonstrated or described his session, the rest of the group, including the teacher, asks questions and makes suggestions for improvements.

2.4.3. Kinds of difficulties tackled

Among the kinds of listening comprehension difficulties tackled have been:

- 1) phoneme discrimination (cp. /f/-/v/);
- 2) word accent (cp. import-import);
- 3) sentence stress (cp. I went to the station-I went to the station);
- 4) weak forms (e.g. I'm, didn't and the words a and of in a cup of tea);
- 5) rapid delivery of unstressed syllables as in unfortunately and Manchester;
- 6) the expressions of different communicative functions by means of intonation (e.g. John's nice, isn't he? (asking for information)—John's nice, 'isn't he? (giving information));
- 7) summarizing, retaining and anticipating the content of utterances;
- 8) working out the meaning of unknown or unheard words from the surrounding linguistic and situational context, and, more generally, grasping the general meaning of a text when some words are missed or unknown;
- 9) insufficient exposure to informal English spoken at normal speed;
- 10) lack of familiarity with different accents (English and American);
- 11) distinguishing homonyms (e.g. bank (of river) and (commercial) bank).

2.4.4. Session plans

The listening comprehension sessions produced tended to fall into

two categories:

- 1) specific difficulty sessions
- 2) general difficulty sessions

In specific difficulty sessions the underlying assumption is that elimination of a specific difficulty (e.g. discriminating /f/ and /v/) will make a small contribution to the improvement of general listening comprehension ability. Sessions concerned with phoneme discrimination, word accent, sentence stress, weak forms and homonyms would fall into this category. Such sessions usually consisted of a fairly brief selection of highly organized but simple repetition, question/answer, etc., drills and fill-in, true/false, etc., exercises. In general difficulty sessions such as those concerned with anticipating the content of the speaker's utterance the underlying assumption is that important listening comprehension sub-skills already acquired and employed in the L1 had to be transferred to and gradually developed in the L2 over a period of time. These sub-skills, moreover, were assumed to be much more general than specific phonetic problems, in the sense that the ability to anticipate the remaining content of a message, for example, implies a) considerable linguistic knowledge and b) other skills such as retention of what has been uttered already. Development of anticipation ability in the L2, thus, would invariably involve simultaneous development of many other components of the listening comprehension skill. Listening comprehension sessions of this kind were thus more substantial and expected to make a more significant contribution to the development of pupils' listening comprehension ability. They were always based on extended spoken texts—equivalent to $\frac{1}{2}$ a page or more in length—and usually consisted of exercises in which various kinds of questions were asked about the text or in which spaces in the text had to be reconstructed. Naturally one couldn't expect the same quick results as with specific phonetic problems. Improvement of the sub-skill would gradually come with regular, text-based guided practice. The problem of insufficient exposure (mentioned above) could of course be tackled at the same time by choosing appropriate texts. ¹⁾

1) For a more detailed description of session plans produced by students, which is not relevant to my purpose here, readers are referred to Trevor Tinkler, 'Methods of teaching Listening Comprehension', Levende Talen, No. 319, August 1976, Wolters-Noordhoff, The Netherlands.

2.4.5. Winding up the course

At the end of the course, all the individual lesson plans are collected together and included in the student-prepared report of the course work. This report is duplicated so that each student can have his own record of what was done and refer to it in the future.

3. EVALUATION OF THE COURSE

3.1. Evaluation of the results of the course—student final performance

The quality of the individual listening comprehension session plans produced has naturally varied quite considerably. In general this variation could be measured in terms of positive or negative answers to the following questions:

1. Is the difficulty chosen a genuine difficulty for Dutch pupils?
2. Is the difficulty chosen a relatively important one? (i.e. does it concern a relatively important aspect of English)
3. Is the level of difficulty of the chosen text appropriate for the pupil level specified?
4. Are the aims of the session clear and realistic?
5. Are the exercises sufficient?
6. Are the exercises well-constructed?
7. Are the materials used likely to stimulate the pupils?
8. Is the method used likely to stimulate the pupils?

However, it would be fair to say that by the end of the course all the students possessed a certain confidence and proficiency.

3.2. Evaluation of the course organization

Class sessions were organized into group activities, either discussing material in advance, or discussing session plans demonstrated or described by individual members of the group. The teacher merged as much as possible into this group, trying to avoid the lecture situation and to create instead a let's-learn-about-it-together situation. The students had to accept responsibility themselves for acquiring sufficient theory and knowledge to produce efficient session plans. Thus this group work helped to ensure the continuous and active participation of all students in the learning process.

Another important feature of the course was its cyclical structure, early sections of the course being recycled in later sections. Thus, if we take the 3 major sections of the course in order—the nature of listening comprehension, listening comprehension difficulties, and

practical work—we see that the nature of listening comprehension comes up again during discussion of listening comprehension difficulties, and they both come up again in the practical work. And if we take the final section, the practical section, alone, we see that this is itself cyclically structured—for every class session involved the presentation of two or three listening comprehension difficulties, demonstration or description of a suggested way of tackling them and group discussion and evaluation of the suggested approach.

A cyclical structure—if too rigid—may create boredom. This problem was avoided through the variety in the course as a whole, with distinct sections in the course, and with some theory and some practice—and also through the variety in the biggest section (the practical one) with the listening comprehension difficulty being tackled and the methodology suggested both constantly changing. The variety too in the roles assumed by members of the group also helped prevent boredom and sustain interest and motivation—for the person assuming the central role of demonstrator or describer was constantly changing.

The pragmatic, functional bias of the course was something which the students very much appreciated. Students' realization that the course had some obvious practical value definitely increased their motivation for the course.

But the students' attitude could not be categorized as 'all practice and no theory' because they entered into the discussion of the nature of listening comprehension and the categories of difficulties with enthusiasm. What I think the students really responded to was the achievement in the course structure of a happy blend of theory and practice, of learning what and learning how.

But apart from the students appreciation of the practical value of the course and of the happy blend of theory and practice, there is the matter of the organization of the practical work itself. When one operates within the walls of a College of Education the practical work is bound to be to a certain extent artificial. It is therefore important to make the practical work as realistic as possible. This is, of course, why demonstrating session plans is better than describing them—doing something rather than talking about it. And this is why it is better to avoid the 'let's pretend' games. These games don't usually decrease the level of artificiality. For the students usually imitate 13/14 year old pupils very badly and the whole affair can very quickly become a big joke. Such games therefore have in my experience been more often

than not counter-productive. What has worked much better is to encourage the students to accept the situation for what it is-- a preparatory situation one step removed from the actual teaching situation. Such an acceptance is itself realistic. Another thing we can and indeed must do to increase the realism of the practical work is to insist upon students producing session plans which are appropriate for pupils in a particular kind of school and class or level within the school. In conclusion, therefore, I consider that acceptance of the preparatory nature of the situation, the production of situationally-acceptable sessions plans, and the use of demonstration rather than description of session plans will, together, form a good basis for realistic practical work within a College of Education.

I would, finally, like to mention the value of making a report at the end of the course of the work done. This not only reinforces the students' awareness of the practical value of the course, thereby assisting in increasing motivation, but also is a realistic and practical thing to do in its own right, since only in this way can individuals be expected to utilize the work of the group as a whole in the future in actual teaching situations.

4. CONCLUSION

I have been principally concerned in this article with the organization of the learning process in a listening comprehension methodology course. Although the course was given in Holland I believe that features of course organization can be adapted to other situations. When the focus is on learning and not teaching it is more obvious that the important variable in courses is the learner himself and the important question is how does he best learn. I hope that by indicating some of the ways in which my students have more efficiently learned to teach listening comprehension I will at least have pin-pointed some of the features of the teacher's organization of the learning process which students in other parts of the world may respond positively to.